

Sait Faik

A DOT ON THE MAP: SELECTED STORIES

Edited by Talat Sait Halman

Bloomington: Indiana University Turkish Studies, 1983.

Pp. xviii + 307

Reviewed by Saad El-Gabalawy

Sait Faik, one of Turkey's most important writers of fiction, typifies a strange trend of realism, wavering between nature and art, action and contemplation. In *A Dot on the Map*, a collection of some fifty very short stories, he reveals a remarkable familiarity with the masses in the slums and meandering alleys of Istanbul, which makes him feel at home with common people without a trace of intellectual snobbery or condescension. They are observed closely, in a spirit of compassion and tenderness, against their natural settings in seamy cafés, working-class taverns, boat landings, small shops or fishing villages. With his empathetic perception of "the little man", Faik often ensnares the truth of life among the lower class in highly significant moments of illumination. For subjects of his stories, he turns to the poor, the oppressed, the underprivileged, the outcast and the delinquent, so that the protagonists are sickly women, abandoned children, degraded servants, petty thieves or pathetic whores, who have failed to find their spiritual home in civilized society. Without melodramatic sentimentality or ideological bias, the writer maintains their integrity as authentic individuals, focusing preeminently on vibrations of feeling and thought at heightened moments of crisis.

In "The Head and the Bottle" (p. 105), the narrator says at the beginning: "I seem to be registering all the unnecessary aspects and the minutest details of many happenings . . . I notice something that might be faintly relevant or utterly absurd." The statement aptly describes a predominant trait in the stories of Sait Faik, who usually derives his material from seemingly trivial or insignificant incidents of everyday life, but endows them with a sense of strangeness and beauty. In fact, he attempts to recreate in the sophisticated mind of the adult the sense of wonder and mystery felt by ignorant and naive characters. In his fiction, the familiar seems peculiar and unfamiliar, seen in a new light by a sensitive writer of exquisite taste. Thus, a dot on the map, the death of a seagull, a sizzling simovar or a bundle of clothes can trigger perceptions and meditations of profound significance.

The reader who expects classic story development, with a tidy plot, is bound to become frustrated and irritable, because actually nothing happens in terms of well-defined action. The stories have the character of "tender and dreamlike vignettes," designed to focus on events of the mind. Through the magic of evocative words and images, the writer releases the imagination from boundaries of time and space, stimulating vague feelings and unsettling insights which have a haunting quality. They linger in the reader's memory and tend to expand gradually, suggesting different dimensions of meaning. The power of ambiguity is manifest vividly in such stories as "Sivriada Nights" and "Love Letter", in which the storyteller relies on the juxtaposition of reality and fantasy with a striking effect. There are several other pieces where the familiar landmarks of the real world are shrouded in a cloud of mystery. It is no accident that fog is a recurrent image in the stories, enhancing the atmosphere of fantasy or daydream.

The prevalent mood is plaintive, almost elegiac, with intimations of tragedy strongly reminiscent of Faulkner. The author dwells on such themes as the loss of innocence, the frustration of hope, the shattered lives of ordinary people, the brutal abuse of poor children, the denial of love or the contamination of the big city. Some of the stories convey subtle suggestions of homosexuality—presumably a reflection of the writer's sexual inclinations—which are redeemed from vulgarity by passion. It should be noted, however, that Faik's tender compassion for the sufferings of the common man has no philosophical foundations. He is not an exponent of committed realism, preoccupied with radical analyses of the economic basis of social malaise. Yet, without indulging in revolutionary rhetoric, he appears to hold out the hope of change and amelioration. It is interesting in this regard that champions of socialist realism in Turkish literature refer to his "aristocratic sensitivity" and "bourgeois origins" ("Introduction," p. 5).

A Dot on the Map has its flaws. Some of the opaque stories, with their shifting tenses and stylistic oddities, betray Sait's notorious carelessness which can be quite irritating at times. The apologetics that such pieces are designed to reflect the flaws of human life through a pattern of anarchy, verges on the absurd. Besides, in terms of lucidity and vividness, the styles of different translators lack consistency and uniformity. Some of them tend to use American slang and colloquialisms, as well as a few remnants of the hippie lingo of the 1960s, which adulterate the atmosphere of the local environment. A superb work of fiction, nevertheless.

Benedict Chiaka Njoku

THE FOUR NOVELS OF CHINUA ACHEBE

New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 1984. Pp. 200

Reviewed by Kalu Ogbaa

Njoku's book is loosely divided into six segments which include an introduction, four chapters (each devoted to each of the four novels), and a final segment titled "Chinua Achebe: A Postscript." The chapters are, however, not balanced in terms of length and contents, an imbalance that reveals that the author appears to understand *A Man of the People* and *Arrow of God* more than he does *Things Fall Apart* and *No Longer at Ease*. As one considers the total contents of the book, one is baffled, for, right from the introduction through "A Postscript," Njoku neither states the object of the study nor indicates his critical bent; and both failures make it impossible for readers to realize what contributions, if any, he is making to the existing scholarship on Achebe's writings. On page six, for example, he attempts to distinguish the physical world from the fictional; but he hardly makes a good case of the argument before leading inductively into asserting that "the novelist creates an imperfect and fictionalized world in which people live, move, interact and have their existence." Again, without explaining what he means by that, he goes on to the next page to make statements that sound like conclusions to the study and that create a quality of open-endedness in his critical style.

The same weakness is continued in "A Postscript." In fact, one would have thought that the segment serves as a conclusion to the study but instead its contents reveal that it is a continuation of the introduction. A postscript, indeed! The unstated critical direction in the introduction as well as the critic's not-too-discreet use of critical terms seriously affect his overall analysis and argument of important issues of Achebe's novels (see, for instance, p. 7). Such critical inaccuracies abound in the study, and they result in erroneous interpretations of incidents and concepts of the novels, such as the wrestling matches, traditional Igbo religion and cosmology, leadership problems, and the role and meaning of *chi*. Also, Njoku compounds his grammatical errors with irritating typographical errors.

As it is, Njoku's *The Four Novels of Chinua Achebe* is a total disappointment, for, instead of being an improvement on Killam's *The Novels of Chinua Achebe* which came out fifteen years before, or an advancement of the scholarly discussions of Achebe's writings that exist in Carroll's, Wren's, and Innes and Lindfors's studies and critical perspectives (some of which he cites frequently and sometimes very poorly), it does a lot of harm to the novels that Njoku attempts to evaluate and a great disservice to his native Igbo whose fictional culture and civilization he has failed to interpret very well to non-Igbo readers.

Wayne B. Stengel

THE SHAPE OF ART IN THE SHORT STORIES OF DONALD BARTHELME

Baton Rouge; Louisiana State University Press, 1985.

Pp. 227, \$22.50

Reviewed by Catherine D. Farmer

Wayne B. Stengel's study of the short stories of Donald Barthelme is based upon this premise: "Reading the range of Barthelme's writing as it has appeared in his eight collections . . . yields evidence of a unity of idea and technique that establishes him as a writer of consistent vision and serious intent" (p. 5). That premise, which Stengel effectively proves in